Presbyterian Large Church Conference

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Presentation #4

DON'T CATCH YOUR BATHROBE ON FIRE:
Leading, Surviving and Loving Our Job

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The title for this presentation comes from Eileen Lindner. Eileen is a good friend of mine, a Presbyterian minister, has worked for years for the National Council of Churches, edits the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, is a tireless advocate for children through her collaboration with Marian Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund. She is also a very funny human being. In her new book on child advocacy, *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*, she tells a story about the day she wore her new pulpit robe for the first time. Eileen writes:

> **"When I was ordained some thirty years ago very few women were ordained in the Presbyterian church. The pulpit robe**

company didn't make women's pulpit robes so my home church had a robe made for me. Anyway, it was Christmastime. I wore my fancy robe (for the first time). I was a little full of myself. It was an Advent service and we had an Advent wreath. I called a young girl to light the candles in the Advent wreath, and I did what pastors do. I gave her exceedingly exact directions. I said to her: "When the time comes, I'll nod. You come down, light the candle, then turn, blow out the match without blowing out the candle, and go sit down."

The time came. "I nodded, she came down and did exactly as I told her, and as I moved over to the Advent wreath, she said in a very clear voice, 'Careful, Reverend, don't set your bathrobe on fire.'"

Yes, we live and work close to the flames — close to the heat and passion and tragedy and exultation, close to pain and loss as well as unbelievable joy of human life. People invite us into their lives at a level accessible to no one else. They tell us things they tell no one else, things we must never tell — even our

spouses: things we carry around in our hearts all our lives. They call us when they lose their job or when a spouse dies. They come see us to tell us sex is no longer interesting; they come to announce that they can't believe in God: that their teenager is doing cocaine. They come to us to bury their dead and marry their children. They expect us to spend Friday night at the rehearsal party — trying to look interested as one fraternity brother after another, under the influence of free booze stands up and describes the sexual exploits of the groom in far more detail than anyone really wants to know, followed by a series of sorority sisters, not to be outdone by the guys, telling us that the bride is no wallflower, no slouch either. And through most of the next day — Saturday — devoted to the biggest day in their lives: the service, the endless wait during the pictures because they want you in robe in the last one, then the cocktail party and reception dinner when you find yourself seated beside Aunt Gertrude from Vermont who is hard of hearing.

They want us to be by their hospital beds when they or their loved ones are critically ill: they invite us into that most intimate space in all of human life — the time when it comes to an end. In Richard Lewis's

wonderful memoir, *Open Secrets*, he describes a situation we have all been in: drives 50 miles to a critical care facility to say a prayer over a comatose patient. "Who sees this act and calls it good?" Lewis asks.

They tell us they love our preaching so much they turn us into addicts, hooked on post worship compliments: and they devastate us with criticism just when we are most vulnerable. They scold us for not condemning the war more forcefully and for condemning the war. They email us that they're canceling their pledge because of what we said about homosexuality: quitting altogether because they find so profoundly distasteful this or that.

They watch our families and discuss our compensation. They know what kind of car we drive and where we go on vacation.

And, remarkably, they not only allow us into their lives, they come week after week and sit quietly and listen to us talk. If there is a more astonishing fact and a more unlikely honor than that — I don't know what it might be.

Describing her struggle with the decision to become a priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> **"I still had no intention of being ordained. In the first place, I could not imagine myself in brocade vestments, taking a leading role in the divine drama that I witnessed every Sunday. At which point did a person decide that he or she was holy enough to do something like that? Being a priest seemed only slightly less dicey to me than being chief engineer at a nuclear plant. In both cases, one needed to know how to approach great power without loosing great danger and getting fried in the process. All in all, I was happier in the pew."**

And so — a final presentation — some thoughts on how to do it without setting your robe on fire — or getting fried in the nuclear meltdown.

There is so much literature on the topic, some helpful, some trivial. I've read much of it, endorsed some of it. I expect you've poured over it, too, hoping finally to learn how to do this thing you've been doing now for decades. I offer my thoughts this morning,

knowing that each of us in our own way has learned not by reading, but by watching someone else do it and then doing it which, after all, is the only way we learn anything.

I'm calling the agenda this morning — *Glenn's List* — and so, if you aren't interested, blame him and work on next Sunday's sermon — discreetly, please.

1. <u>Time Management and Sermon Preparation</u>

For me the two are pretty much one subject, because sermon preparation is central for me, the one given that influences everything else. No one ever told me that's the way it is, but it has been ever since that Sunday in September of 1960 — when I preached my first sermon to the small congregation that had called me to be its student pastor (for $50 per week and a free house) — that terrifying Sunday when, after I had delivered myself of a twenty minute survey of the Bible, the history of Western thought, art, literature and politics — everything I knew and had to say, and realized that they expected me to do it again next week.

And so I have taught myself to manage my time for the simple reason that next Sunday a group of

generous men and women are going to gather and expect me to say something, interesting, relevant, helpful and true.

I learned long ago that the longer the preparation process is, the better it's going to go for me. And the shorter the process, one week, a few days, one day — the harder it will be, and I will sit at my desk facing an empty legal pad, alternately praying for God to rescue me or wondering why in the world I hadn't taken the job with IBM.

So here is what I've learned to do. Twice a year, once in the summer and once in January, I sit down with a Bible, the lectionary and a legal pad. I copy the lectionary readings for each Sunday on the pad, and then I read them, in sequence, Psalter, Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel. I write a sentence about each — "God's steadfast love" — "the people are in exile" — "the Corinthians are fighting and Paul tells them to knock it off" — "Jesus welcomes the children." I do that for each Sunday for the five or six months. I want to get the whole sweep of what the lectionary wants me to be thinking about. I do not always follow it and use the readings for every Sunday. I do think I am responsible to listen to what the ecumenical church

will be thinking about on any given Sunday. Sometimes — often in fact — I argue back, become irritated — wonder what the lectionary writers were thinking about — but I read the passages, ponder them, listen to them.

Sometimes big themes emerge. Sometimes a spark is ignited for a Sunday or two. Sometimes my pondering leads me in a direction altogether different from where the lectionary wants to go. Must we think about the eschaton every year on the second Sunday of Advent and the transfiguration, year after year, to the end of the age, on the Sunday before Lent?

After a few days of pondering, arguing, fussing, I write the passages on a single sheet of paper for each Sunday. Some themes are becoming clear: some are not. I'm already thinking of ideas, illustrations, stories, books and writing them down. That act — of assigning a sheet, and readings — and when possible themes for each Sunday, is like opening a mental file drawer.

As soon as I do it stuff starts to accumulate — movies, concerts, plays, books, conversations, newspaper articles. And I write them in, or clip and

insert on the page. When the system works — the page will contain more resources than I can use for that Sunday. And I can produce a calendar with readings and themes for the musician worship planners.

Formal preparation begins insofar as possible — although I'm pretty rigid about it — even when traveling, with Bible study, exegesis on Monday, using standard resources: Texts for Preaching, Interpretation. I'll fill five or six pages with notes. I'll work an hour or so on Tuesday morning at my desk at home before heading for church and Tuesday staff meeting. Wednesday morning I stay home and track down and read the ancillary resources — the *New York Times* editorial I clipped, the movie reference, what the scholars and theologians have said and are saying, literary analogies and illustrations: Douglas John Hall, Walter Brueggemann, Kathleen Norris, John Updike, maybe a poet: Jane Kenyon, Billy Collins, Mary Oliver. By noon I have maybe twenty pages of notes. Before bed Wednesday evening, I read and red line all of it, scratching out as I go and then I reduce it to twenty or twenty-five simple sentences. That's where I stop and on a good week, I'm convinced, the sermon starts to write itself while I'm sleeping. Thursday morning I

lift from those twenty or twenty-five sentences the key ideas, the points — if you will, create an outline — an idea flow I call it, and then start writing. I write them out — every single word. I know I'm simply better, think more clearly and more expressively with a pen in m y hand, than I do on my feet. I can do it. But the discipline of writing helps me with a sense of the wholeness of the sermon and most important of all, when and where it needs to end. Writing takes most of the morning. I hand it to my administrative assistant on Thursday who types it and hands it back at the end of the day. I run my eye over it, put it in my briefcase and then it begins to ferment. I let it go — read it a time or two on Friday, Saturday evening before dinner. I'm up early Sunday — I used to take it into the pulpit in the darkened sanctuary before anyone else was there and preach it. I want to hear it — hear the words as they hit the air — hear what it sounds like. I do it in the kitchen now at 5:30 a.m. Since we established an 8:00 service — the housestaff and musicians are at church early: and I'd have to show up at 4:30 to insure privacy. I tried it for a while — preaching in semi darkness while the housestaff are straightening hymnbooks — and they thought I was crazy. So I do it — preach it out loud in the kitchen. Then, having heard it — truly — I go to work again for

45 minutes, surgery, I call it: cutting, rearranging, rewriting the conclusion, underlining.

When I preach it at 8:00 — it's a mess — but I pretty much know it. And I continue to edit, alter and change — right up to the third and final time I preach it at 11:00.

It is a major investment of time and it dictates much of the rest of the week. But I do stick to it — and simply never let anything change it — particularly the Thursday morning writing.

It is a discipline I need and its advantage is that it has always liberated me from — what for me is the worst of all possible circumstances and that is waiting until Saturday — Saturday night even. I've done it a few times and hated it. So has my wife — who in the early days typed them and did the bulletin on the Gestetner Mimeograph Machine on Saturday night after the children were in bed. Romantically then, we opened a bottle of Mateus — yes, we used to drink stuff like that — and together folded the envelopes.

It also falls under the heading of keeping healthy and staying alive — but I've learned over the years to

keep Saturday as open as possible — for family, for children and now grandchildren and then sports, for movies and drinks and dinner — which is to say — for normality.

How about time off? I have always taken as much of Saturday as I could get away with — and my thought has always been that it's as much as the other professionals in the community with whom I like to identify. And after the Bible study on Monday morning I'm ordinarily pretty free. One thing is for sure in this business and that is that the work is never done and if you're not careful you can work yourself to death literally. It's much better for me now — but being pastor of a 500 member church can be a killer . . . all those evening meetings, sometimes every night of the week — working all day — home for a quick bite, see the kids, give a few baths, then out the door to the Stewardship Committee, the Christian Ed Committee, the Deacons, Session; you're the only staff person and so you're there and you're dragging home at 9:00 or 9:30 exhausted and often not very happy. In that context a designated day off — with nothing scheduled — is an absolute must.

After years of missing important, one-time, family events: concerts, plays, sports events because I was too busy — I woke up and realized "this is stupid." And so I resolved not to miss one-time events for my children. And I began to build it into my *modus operandi* — "I'll have to leave this meeting at 4:00: my son is starting at Center and I need to be there."

One of the great secrets of a city church is that there aren't many evening meetings. Meetings happen at the end of the workday, at 5:00 or 5:30 or 6:00 and you're home at 7:00 — but for good. I've come to love it.

I learned basic time management — about which there are libraries of books and armies of consultants — I learned it from my father, a Railroad Engineer — who kept a 3x5 card in his pocket, on which he had written the things he wanted and needed to do each day. "Make your list. Do your list." I still do it — a 3x5 card — with what I need to do tomorrow — meetings, appointments, telephone calls, work outs, lunch, letters to dictate, staff to meet. Make a list and do the list. Obviously paying attention to the priorities — which for me include sermon preparation and time at home with my wife.

Most of us have the gift of very generous vacations and study leaves. It is one of the great, great gifts of this profession — six weeks for most throughout most of our careers: four week vacations, two weeks study leave. I do most of my reading during those times. A perfect vacation day for me begins early — at the beach — with coffee and on a rocking chair on the porch for thirty or forty-five minutes with the Psalms — I try to read them all each summer, and a devotional reading — Joan Chittister and Philip Newell, for instance, and then a sermon — Buechner, Gomes, Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor; then to a desk and the stack of books I've been accumulating. . . the serious theology — or related material I need to read and never, I confess, have been able to read during the normal work schedule. So I build a pile of books that will require a little sustained concentration and I plow through them. Mid morning I turn to pleasure reading: biographies, novels. History — stuff I enjoy and which frankly often works its way into sermons.

When they were smaller the children, who slept late, indulged me — and now grandchildren do.

The weekly rhythm for most of us includes recurring and necessary times — for sermon preparation, for staff meetings, for consultation and planning with colleagues, for counseling and pastoral care — times when you know and your people know you are available. And for me *The Christian Century*— I'm in touch with David Heim, Executive Editor, regularly and am in the office, a mile and a half away from Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue, Thursday afternoon — after the sermon is written and most of the day Friday.

For what it is worth — when I eat lunch alone, I eat in my office, working — so "not Italian" — and when I absolutely have to, business lunches — but always schedule something for 1:00 or 1:15 so I have reason to cut short what could go on for two hours.

<u>Pastoral Care</u> — is both critical and problematic. It is critical, my deepest conviction is, because our people will give us a hearing as preacher — occasionally even prophet — to the extent they know us as pastor, I know it is absolutely essential for my sense of my vocation, my preaching to be a pastor. The problem is finding time to do it — and the greater

problem — the sheer number of people involved. So — two ideas, neither original or unique.

The busy Head-of-Staff — of a multiple staff church — must be very intentional about being a pastor. My predecessor, Elam Davies, resolved it by choosing a few families — and showering them with pastoral attention. I was never comfortable with that although some of it happens naturally. I sometimes think that my congregation, for pastoral attention, is the officers and leaders who I know best.

The system we have developed works fairly well, I think. In a large urban church there are unique hurdles. There are lots of church members no one on the staff knows. I'm sorry about it and it was never true in any of the other churches I knew. But it is at Fourth.

There are many anonymous members. Some of them like it that way. Some join, we have learned, because they can be a member and remain anonymous. Some are burned out from over commitment at another church, and come to us because they can sit in the balcony for years without anyone speaking to them let alone asking them to

serve on the Stewardship Committee. Add to that the natural anonymity of condominium and apartment living — in which people live mere feet from one another and never meet . . . and add in the fact that most hospital stays are a day or two at most — and you have a major change in the way the church exists as a caring community and the way the ministry of pastoral care occurs. Some of course do not want anonymity. Some want community and pastoral attention and a sense that they belong to a body which is in some way a coherent body. They are the ones who remind me that they've been absent from worship for two months and nobody noticed: the one who when I greet her on Sunday morning with "and how are you?" responds a little testily, "I'm fine, now."

For years Fourth Church had the parish system, 48 separate geographic entities, each led by a convener. The idea was that people would know and attend to one another if they lived in the same neighborhood. It worked for two decades and was slowly dying when I arrived.

What we do now begins with prayer. Every weekday begins with Morning Prayers in one of our chapels. Staff persons are invited and encouraged to

attend, one is assigned to lead. We read scripture, hear about the Presbyterian Family from the Mission Yearbook of Prayer, and pray — first for the long list of people in hospitals, nursing homes, people we know who are in some kind of stress or trouble . . . and we pray each day for six or eight of our families and members, by name. Asking God's blessing and gracious presence in their lives. Every one of our 5,600 members gets prayed for once a year.

We send each of them a letter — which I sign, telling them that we will be praying for them, inviting them to be present if they wish — a few come — and inviting them to communicate any special needs or concerns so that we can include them in our prayers. The response is surprising. Many people tell us how much it means to them to know they are being prayed for. A fair number do call or write and tell us what's on their mind, a surgery, a dear one sick, a child depressed, unemployment.

The final part of the program is a telephone call. Members of our Board of Deacons come to the church office several nights a week and telephone the people who will be prayed for that week. The Deacon simply expresses greetings, reminds them that they will be

prayed for this week and repeats the invitation to let us know any concerns for which they need prayers.

Obviously, you speak to a lot of voice mails — another symbol of the anonymity of urban culture. But the response is very positive. People are surprised to be hearing from their church without being asked for something.

Our Associate for Congregational Care — who is also the staff person for the Deacons — produces a weekly report — shared at Staff Meeting — of the calls made and the responses. Her job, in addition, is to see that people who need attention get it. Each clergy is part of the Pastoral Care delivery system, and Ali asks — or assigns — responsibilities to each of us, assuming a large share for herself.

She also convenes a bi-weekly meeting of the Pastoral Care Team, which includes two Parish Associates, our Volunteer Coordinator and the Directors of our Center for Older Adults and Health Ministry. The team discusses and deals with urgent crises — an older person who has a health crisis and no one at home to manage her care — is a common one. One of our members struggling with HIV-AIDS is

another. Volunteers are solicited and organized into individual care teams for each case. They visit, do grocery shopping, take care of prescriptions, sometimes do laundry and clean house, provide transportation — sometimes read and pray.

Recruiting staff is critical to our life: relating to staff, leading a staff. Again, the literature is plentiful. My practice is to be involved, deeply, in the recruiting and calling of Associate Pastors, Musicians and Educators. I know the system doesn't make it easy and sometimes even frowns on it, but I have learned over the years that I have a share — the largest share — in the selection process. We are, after all, talking about a person who will join a team that already has a leader and whose leadership will be a simple fact of life for the years — hopefully — ahead. And so he-she must know who I am and what I'm about and in some way share my vision for the ministry of the congregation and at least be open to accommodating my style of leadership. I have learned an uncomfortable truth over the years. The best relationships with Associates and the most effective ministers are those in which I was prominently involved in the call process. The most difficult calls turned out to be the ones which, for one reason or

another, I had little or no involvement in. When Associate Pastor Nominating Committees are elected — I tell them that I have a huge stake in their work and I ask for their consideration of my opinions. Mostly it works.

I love working with colleagues. It has been the source of great joy and satisfaction over the years. There have been bumps in the road, but not many. My style has been to be accessible — always to my colleagues: the door is always open. And it has been to be a presence: to stop by and say hello every day: to inquire about children and spouses and weekend plans. My style, after the person is in place, is to rest a very light hand, and allow each colleague to be an independent and entrepreneur. And it has been to insist on mutual accountability — not always easy at first, but patiently to teach when it comes to a staff, St. Paul was exactly right: each member has a role to play, and what one does or doesn't do has an effect on everyone else.

A very important part of what I have learned about staff relationships and management is the creation and staffing of a strong Personnel Committee. The committee meets monthly with the

Pastor and Executive Associate to discuss and act on all personnel matters — for the Program Staff. The Personnel Committee brings to the Session recommendations regarding the formation of Associate Pastor Nominating Committees, position descriptions, Parish Associates, retirements. The committee also conducts an annual performance review as follows:

1. Each program Staff person receives from the Personnel Committee a copy of the prior year's Key Objectives (3 to 5) and a request to prepare a self-evaluation of performance against objectives. At the same time each person is asked to set 3-5 key objectives for the following year.

2. Each person meets with the Head of Staff and Executive Associate to review the self-evaluations and next year's Key Objectives. The Head of Staff and Executive Associate respond and sign off on Key Objectives.

3. The Personnel Committee sends an evaluation form regarding job performance to the Chairs of each Committee/Board/Mission unit — to which each staff

person relates. When completed, the forms are submitted to the Personnel Committee.

4. A member of the Personnel Committee meets with each Program Staff person to review the assembled materials and gives opportunity for each staff person to provide further input of any kind.

5. All the materials are collated and organized in a loose-leaf notebook for each Personnel Committee member.

6. At an extended Personnel Committee meeting, over dinner the materials are reviewed and the committee decides on an appropriate response to each, positive, critical, suggestions and a compensation recommendation.

7. At an Executive Session at the end of the January Session meeting, the Personnel Committee presents its report including summaries of the Evaluation Process and compensation recommendations for each staff person.

I love working in a community. I love loving my colleagues. I take risks in being a friend in ministry

and inviting friendship. We eat and drink and laugh together as much as we can. We eat lunch biweekly — a eucharistic extension of our business meeting. We gather to celebrate goings and comings — in local restaurants and bars and in my condominium. We gather for drinks in our condo and an elegant Christmas dinner. And twice a year we schedule overnight retreats — one for planning, the other for enrichment — both opportunities to drink and eat together, to laugh and talk late into the night.

Worship responsibilities and music are, of course, critical and for some a veritable minefield. I've been blessed and am blessed with an absence of worship wars and a congregation that historically has understood part of its purpose to present and celebrate traditional Reformed Worship. And that is what we do. For the record, I reject that idea that traditional is synonymous with boring. Praise Bands can be and often are as boring as a mediocre organist. We aspire to use the best of our tradition and to do music in lively, strong contemporary as well as classical. Our definition of contemporary does not include what Marva Dawn calls the "dumbing-down" of worship. I choose the theme for each Sunday when I do my long range sermon planning. My colleagues

in music know in advance where I am going homiletically and choose service music and anthems accordingly. I choose the hymns — more often than not it works.

The musicians with whom I have been privileged to work have all responded graciously and cooperatively to the invitation to talk and discuss and to be integral and accountable members of the staff team — including the delivery of pastoral care.

Finally, Glenn asked me to think about <u>"Do's and Don'ts" for persons assuming Head of Staff positions</u> for the first time.

The following are simply gleanings and may be relevant whenever we move to a new position.

There are three major, urgent priorities at the beginning of a new ministry:

1. **The first is getting to know and becoming part of the existing staff.**
2. **The second is getting to know the leadership of the congregation as quickly as possible.**

3. Third is getting to know the new community and its leaders.

Those three are pretty much a full-time load for a few months — so my advice has been — give yourself a break from your normal routine of sermon preparation. Go to the barrel — pull out your hit parade, your top ten — freshen them up a bit and use the time saved to do the three most urgent tasks.

Meet with each staff person — ask what their job is: what they like about it: what they would like to change: listen — listen — listen. If there are job descriptions, discuss them. If there are not, ask each to simply write a description of what they are doing.

Identify the person who knows everything — it probably is your new Administrative Assistant — ask her or him to write down the name of everyone you need to know immediately: the leaders, decision makers, the head usher, the troublemakers, the *Tribal Elders* — who exert enormous influence whether or not they are officers. Take as much time as it requires, breakfasts, lunches, coffee, appointments — and ask them about their history and experience of the church. Ask them to tell you the story of themselves

and First Church. Ask what is good and important about us and what needs to be better.

Ask your Administrative Assistant to manage this whole process, make appointments.

And — get acquainted with your new community. Make an appointment with the Mayor, the CEO of the hospital, the University President, the Alderman — in Chicago — and go visit the Captain of the Local Police precinct. You need to know him and he needs to know who you are.

Don’ts are obvious. Most you learned by making mistakes.

Don’t change anything for a while — maybe a year or two.

When you change — don’t indict the past: don’t propose a new liturgy by implying that the old one is out-of-date, irrelevant, and thoroughly suspect.

Don’t refer to your old church. Bite your tongue if you have but never say — “When I was at Broad Street, we used to. . . ”

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Finally, do take care of yourself. We work hard and long. Take care of your spirit. Feed your soul. A concert, a play, the ballet, a movie is an integral necessity.

Take care of your body. Exercise — regularly, jog, walk, bike, swim — several times a week, daily if possible.

Take care of your relationships. It is so easy to neglect, to push aside, and overlook — the most precious gift God gives — someone to love and care for.

Thank you for listening to all of this — for allowing me to reflect on it all.

There is so much to love — and as I near the time to retire — I find myself loving with a new clarity and a new affection — and a new sense of the great privilege of it.

I began with Barbara Brown Taylor and so it is appropriate to close with a few words from *Leaving Church*:

> **"When people ask me what I miss most about serving a church, the answer is this: I miss baptisms and funerals, parish picnics and hospital calls (I miss the children, after worship, hugging my knees as I greet their parents), but what I miss most is celebrating communion with people I love. Most of us do not live especially holy lives, after all. We spend most of our time sitting in traffic, paying bills and being irritated with one another. Yet every week we are invited to stop all that for an hour at least. We are invited to participate in a great drama that has been going on without us for thousands of years, and one that will go on as long as there is a single player left standing."**

What a privilege. What a blessing.

Thank you for listening to me.